

VI. THREATS TO MICHIGAN FORESTS

Below are key threats to Michigan's forestland base and the traditional uses associated with it:

1. Conversion of forests for the purposes of residential and commercial development.
2. Sell-off of industry lands due to corporation directives to reduce debt and increase overall competitiveness.
3. A significant increase in second-home development, particularly in the Northern Lower Peninsula and along the shorelines of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.
4. Increasing development accruing an increased tax burden on private individuals holding forestland, thereby creating incentives to sell such land for residential development.
5. Current property tax law in Michigan allows townships to assess a property on its highest potential use, not its current use, unless a modification to the property deed, such as a conservation easement, states that the use of the property cannot be changed from its current state (e.g. forestland) to another state (e.g. residential use).
6. Influx of aggressive, non-native plant and animal species.
7. An increase in which commercial or residential uses of land adjacent to forests conflict with the traditional uses of Michigan's forests.

With development pressure also come changes in land economics and land values, and these factors become increasingly difficult for private landowners and communities to resist when making land use decisions. All too often land value in excess of the timber value on large tracts of forestlands can be generated simply by breaking the land into smaller units for sale. In forested places along Michigan's Great Lakes coastline—places where scenic value is at a high premium, but also high demand—this pressure may be simply too great to resist for many landowners over time. Conservation easements could provide some assistance for landowners interested in preserving the forested nature of these areas.

In addition to threats related to development, there are some management practices that are incompatible with maintaining the viability of some forests. Lack of understanding by both private landowners and the public at large creates significant management challenges that could threaten the long-term health of much of Michigan's private forestland. As development increases and

fragmentation occurs, the interface between “wild” and “urban” areas also increases, bringing social pressures on private forest landowners to alter or modify their forestry practices. Easements, especially when used in concert with other state and federal programs, can provide an additional tool to help address these management issues.

Another issue that is threatening the traditional uses and health of Michigan’s forests is a type of ecological contamination in which aggressive non-native plants and animals begin using Michigan’s forests and trees as food and habitat, threatening the health and viability of Michigan’s forests. Plant species such as garlic mustard, Asian honeysuckle and Eurasian buckthorn are degrading the quality and ability of Michigan’s forests to provide habitat for native understory plants and native herbs collected for recreational and commercial use.

Aggressive non-native insects are another major threat to Michigan’s forests. Already, the gypsy moth is found throughout most, if not all, of Michigan’s forests. The gypsy moth threatens Michigan’s forests by its sizeable appetite for the leaves of deciduous trees, especially oak and aspen and weakening attacked trees in the process. Attacked trees must then expend energy to create new leaves, thereby leaving less energy and resources for Michigan’s forests to fight off traditional pests, such as the two-lined chestnut borer.

Another non-native insect that has quickly become a major concern and threat to Michigan’s forests is the *emerald ash borer* (EAB). Native to China and other parts of eastern Asia, this little known insect feeds on the cambium layer of all varieties of ash which girdles the affected tree. Death is usually the result. Just detected in Michigan in June, 2002, the destruction caused by the EAB has resulted in the quarantine of five counties in southeastern Michigan to prevent spread of this insect. To date, the EAB has damaged or killed millions of ash trees in southeastern Michigan and has the potential to kill or damage millions more throughout Michigan.

The Michigan timber industry is restructuring, with major industrial landowners selling large tracts of land as the industry consolidates and reduces debt. Financial services companies are increasingly investing in timberlands, though the nature of these investments sometimes leads to increasing fragmentation of developable lands. Easements secured as these ownership changes take place could offer an opportunity to achieve conservation on a vast scale.

In the Upper Peninsula, the areas surrounding Marquette and Escanaba are projected to see the most intensive development. The newly built locations, according to the Land Transformation Model employed in the analysis, are otherwise scattered throughout the southern Lower Peninsula and less prevalently in the northern Lower and Upper Peninsulas. These areas of projected concentrations of development are included in the criteria for Forest Legacy Areas.

Population shifts may be compounded by an aging Michigan population and broader sociological changes. The population in many of Michigan's rural areas is aging, and younger generations are less inclined to maintain family ownership as they migrate to urban centers, reflecting a national trend. Non-industrial owners of private forest are unlikely to be immune from this larger trend, meaning changing ownership patterns.

The retirement and more affluent lifestyle of baby boomers is often cited as a driving force behind the increase in second-home development. These factors, coupled with the economic considerations above, may be behind the trend of increasing parcelization of forests into smaller tracts. Because development and parcelization is really happening in many areas, and not necessarily limited to areas of denser population concentrations, the threat of development of a particular tract is recognized in the criteria for prioritizing parcels for acquisition.

Lastly, increasing urbanization of rural forested areas brings about a situation in which new residents or users resent some the traditional uses of Michigan's forests, particularly providing wood products. Such resentment may lead to harassment of loggers and forest landowners and attempts by newer residents of urban lineage to attempt to restrict the ability of forest landowners to manage their land for forest products or deter them from seeking out forest management expertise.